

The Changing Dynamics of Christian Communication in a Postmodern and Post-truth Multireligious Society

Babu Joseph Karakombil

I am glad to be part of this ASPAC MER seminar at the Catholic University at Kupang in Indonesia and the opportunity to share with you all some thoughts of mine on this very important topic, “Christian mission in the postmodern and post truth society.” While focussing on the challenges we face in a post-modern and post-truth society, I thought it might also be relevant to add the sitz-in-laben in most of the Asian countries, namely the religious pluralism.

This is significant in so far as it is the lived experience of many of us living and working in Asian countries where religious pluralism has created some of the finest aspects of human civilizations, but at the same time it has also generated serious social and political upheaval and polarization. Unfortunately some of these trends are propelled by political machinations aimed at gaining and consolidating political power. Have the post-modern and post-truth trends abetted such socio-political churning or they are still to catch up with most of the Asian countries? The answer to this question cannot come in neat binaries for the simple reason that it is a complex situation: while on one hand one can certainly find some influence of the post-modern and post-truth trends in shaping and forming the contemporary social and political discourses in this part of the world, one can also trace the deep rooted beliefs and practices to the pre-modern mind set. As Meera Nanda rightly says, “Modern India has embraced the end products of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment in the west – namely modern technology and a liberal-secular framework of law encoded in the Constitution. But it has done so without challenging the cultural authority of the supernatural and mystical world view derived from the idealistic strands of Hinduism (Nanda, 2006; 191).

Contemporary Indian ethos is therefore a curious mixture of religious and mythical flavours that align with the fruits of modern scientific and technological developments. It isn't a rare sight in India, where highly qualified scientists and technocrats appeal to the soothsayers before conducting significant events in their personal and professional lives. Astrology in India as well as in most of the Asian countries seems to be a coping mechanism for the stress and uncertainty of life. As Christopher French, Professor of Psychology at University of London says, “Anything that appears to provide a glimpse of what is waiting around the next corner may give someone a better sense of control, even if that sense of control is illusory.”

POLYCENTRIC CHALLENGES FOR MISSIONARIES IN INDIA

Before we can meaningfully speak of sharing the Christian faith in India and in several Asian countries, it is important for us to decipher some of the contemporary social and political challenges that have a strong bearing on our mission. India is rather a young nation in the sense that it is only 75 years since it gained independence from the British. During the two and a half centuries of colonialism in India, Christianity came to be viewed as a European religion and therefore an oppressing force for the Hindu majority. Suspicion, rather than anything else, guided the minds of even erudite Hindus when it came to dealing with Christian missionaries. Such negative views on Christianity were accentuated during the freedom struggle of India, mainly due to the propaganda by right wing Hindu groups as well as from political leaders. including Mahatma Gandhi himself. He said,

I like your Christ, but not your Christianity. I believe in the teachings of Christ, but you on the other side of the world do not. I read the Bible faithfully and see little in Christendom that those who profess faith pretend to see. The Christians above all others are seeking after wealth. Their aim is to be rich at the expense of their neighbours. They come among aliens to exploit them for their own good and cheat them to do so. Their prosperity is far more essential to them than the life, liberty, and happiness of others. The Christians are the most warlike people (Holmes, 1927).

Such views of significant persons in India has had a profound impact on the minds of ordinary Hindus about Christianity. What is more damaging are the attempts made by some anti-Christian forces in the country to portray negatively all the good works done by the benevolent missionaries for millions of Indians, majority of whom are Hindus in poor light.

LEGISLATIVE MEASURES TO LIMIT CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES:

The dawn of independence in India also coincided with efforts to implement the Hindu majoritarian agenda. Strong voices were raised to turn independent India into a theocratic State after the model of Pakistan. In addition to such demands of the right wing, Hindu groups—even some members of the Constituent Assembly who deliberated on the draft Constitution of India—also supported the idea; however thanks to the saner voices among them chiefly led by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India stood like a rock against it. Because of this, we have a liberal democratic republic, at least constitutionally (John De Co, 1948: 406).

This liberal and secular trajectory followed by the stalwarts of the independence movements of India wasn't totally received and endorsed by those whose vision of India was stuck on a theocratic mode of governance, and by implication majoritarian hegemony. This was abundantly made clear by a series of measures the independent India took against the religious minority communities in general and the Christian

missionaries in particular. As for instance Dr Katju, India's Minister for Home Affairs and Law in 1953 told Parliament that, while everyone in India was free to propagate his religion, the Government of India did not want people from outside to come and do propagate. Dr Katju was placing limitations on the work of foreign missionaries and said: "If they come here to evangelise, then the sooner they stop doing it the better" (the Guardians, 1953 and 2013).

Such discriminatory and repulsive measures against the Christian missionaries were not limited to the Federal Government's domain, but it trickled down to the provinces or states. For instance, the state of Madhya Pradesh in India was the first to enact an anti-conversion law in 1968 that sought to regulate religious conversion, thereby making the work of Christian missionaries extremely difficult, particularly among the indigenous people (Pradesh, 1968). The trend is on the rise with nine states of India having already passed legislation against religious conversion and the penalty for any such religious conversion is disproportionately high on Christian missionaries. This was meant to regulate the conversion of people from one religion to another. Although it was a violation of the fundamental rights of citizens to choose a religion of his choice, the law was in force.

RIGHT-WING HINDU MAJORITARIAN HEGEMONY :

The Hindu right wing movements were already in place in the first quarter of the 20th century with the establishment of Rastriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), a group which played little role in the freedom movement of India. In fact they were a reactionary force in India against the alleged Muslim demands for sharing of political power and economic means. However this right wing organisation was kept under check due to the strong influence of secular minded leaders of the freedom movement such as Dadabhai Naorji, Badruddin Tyabji and Surendranath Banerjea. It was also enunciated by Vallabhbhai Patel in his presidential address to the Congress in 1931 and by Maulana Azad in his presidential address in 1940 as a retort to the Muslim League's clamour for the Partition of India. Nehru faced the reaction thereafter. This tragic situation brought out the best in him and he emerged as a highly articulate spokesperson and the icon of the secular State (Noorani, 2019).

The right wing movement under the pressure of secular leaders remained subdued for a while but it never was totally obliterated. It rather assumed new forms and began to spread its tentacles in the Hindu society, creating a victimhood syndrome—fictitious—among them. In some course of time this syndrom paid off rich dividends in terms of social mobilisation and political consolidation of the majority community. What India witnesses today is the fruition of the long drawn social engineering by right wing Hindu organisations, which has made the life and work of Christian missionaries quite worrisome (Imsu, 2022: 6).

POST-MODERN TRENDS IN INDIAN SOCIETY

While on one hand the multi-religious social context poses a challenge for the Christian missionaries in India, there is on the other hand the post-modern influence that has generated a deeper crisis of missionary endeavours. Although there may not be equitable levels of post-modern influences on Indian society, primarily because of its disparate exposure to modern education and global cultural developments, one cannot deny the fact that Indian society has entered its trappings.

Postmodernism is largely a reaction against the intellectual assumptions and values of the modern period in the history of Western philosophy. Indeed, many of the doctrines characteristically associated with postmodernism can fairly be described as the straightforward denial of general philosophical viewpoints that were taken for granted during the 18th-century, though they were not unique to that period. The modernists would claim that there is an objective natural reality, a reality whose existence and properties are logically independent of human beings. Postmodernists dismiss this idea as a kind of naive realism. For post-modernists such reality is but a conceptual construct, an artefact of scientific practice and language. This approach is also valid for the investigation of past events by historians and to the description of social institutions, structures, or practices by social scientists.

Postmodernists also deny the Enlightenment faith in science and technology as instruments of human progress. Indeed, many postmodernists hold that the blind pursuit of science and technology led to the development of technologies for killing on a massive scale in World War II. Some go so far as to say that science and technology—and even reason and logic—are inherently destructive and oppressive. The postmodernists therefore has an natural distrust of the meta-narratives or the totalising tendencies that have pushed to the margins or even silenced discourses that are dissenting and distinctive (Duignan, 2022).

There are discernible signs that go to show that India has already moved into a post-modern mode of life. Information technology has hastened this process by making knowledge accessible to everyone. The rise of popular culture is another sign of postmodern society in India. The popular culture is very much evident in the mass communication discourse in the country. The emergence of popular culture in contemporary Indian society indicates that the country is fast becoming a postmodern society.

Another indication of postmodernism is the rising expectation of the people in India. There is an all-round enchantment among the people when the government, which has created the space for liberalization, privatization and globalization since 1990. This acceleration of the Indian economy and its increasing integration with the global economy has also opened the floodgates of social upheaval in the country. A new generation of middle class citizens have emerged in India. There is an upward movement of people on the social and economic ladder, and that has created new

post-modern conditions in India. The hitherto “invisible” communities in India begin to push their way to the centre of social and political space, finding their rightful place, but the ultra-orthodox forces in India also resist the new phenomenon.

ASSERTION BY SUBALTERN GROUPS IN INDIA

The subaltern groups of India (the Tribals, the Dalits and other backward classes) are no longer passive victims of the hierarchical social order but have actively engaged with the new democratic social, economic and political narrative. For instance, Gaurav J. Pathania in his article “Food Politics and Counter Hegemonic Assertion in Indian University Campuses” writes that the food and its associated myths have been challenged through organising “beef festivals “on university campuses by the students who pledge allegiance to the subaltern groups. They challenge the dominant culture that prescribes certain food habits and social interaction for the majority of Indians, and this is most visible on university campuses and in socio-political movements. The rise and assertion of the Dalits (former outcastes) through political mobilisation has made their presence significant in the political landscape of India. All the major political parties in India can no longer afford to ignore the vote share of this sizable section of the society. The untouchable caste, or Dalits as they now prefer to be called, are 20 percent of India’s population - and in 1999, prompted by a new breed of savvy leaders, Dalits can swing or decide elections in five large states, including the most crucial state of Uttar Pradesh in the northern Hindu stronghold (Marquand, 1999),

Another notable development in the assertion of subaltern groups in India is the entry of Dalit women into journalism – an area that had little presence of them. In 2002 by a non-profit group, Nirantar, that works in women’s literacy and with low-caste Dalits, who are on the bottom rung of India’s social hierarchy and find little representation in the media. Their efforts accumulated rich dividends as their all-women, all-Dalit team of Khabar Lahariya (News Wave), a regional-language weekly, made headlines. Those disadvantaged areas do not generally make the news. Within a short span there are now 30 women reporters in 10 districts in the state of Uttar Pradesh (Chandran, 2017).

POST-TRUTH TRENDS IN INDIAN SOCIETY

A logical consequence of the emergence of post-modern societies is that they are destined to arrive at post-truth conditions, and one can find certain traits of this in contemporary Indian society. A post-truth society is bound to raise questions that would unsettle the established norms and institutions that have largely been designed and enforced by the dominant social and political sections of society. Post truth society will embark on a path that is bound to meet with twisted facts and concocted narratives to suit the political and even religious convenience.

Elaborating on what constitutes post-truth society, Ravi Joshi writes in the Wire that “post-Truth is more than merely ‘falsifying facts’ or spreading fake news. Its purpose is to neutralise rational and critical thought by appealing to emotions on

half-truths or repeating statements that have been proven false but are convenient and sound credible.” (Ravi, 2021). These tendencies are more than evident in Indian society and can be gauged from the repeated instances of stifling dissenting voices, eliminating those who stand for rational and logical approach to life and administering institutions, These tendencies appeal to myths and mythologies to give credence to social and religious practices, some of which are patently outlandish and even absurd.

In contemporary India, politics has become the lead vehicle for pandering to post-truth narratives; they spin fantastic stories of a great future and they are transmitted to gullible people in the most eye-catching manner through the glitz and glamour of the media. For instance, Narendra Modi, Amit Shah, and other senior party leaders made grandiose promises while launching the ‘sankalp patra’, BJP’s manifesto for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections in 2019. Apart from making India the third largest economy of the world by 2030, Ram Mandir, doubling farmers’ income through the abrogation of Article 35A, also found mention in the ruling party’s poll manifesto (The Economic Times, 2019). How many of these promises will actually be translated into reality is something one has to wait and watch for.

Post truth tendencies have also unfortunately infiltrated scientific and social narratives in India. Although science has to base itself on hard evidence and facts, some of the recent developments on the corridors of scientific fraternity how that they have bent themselves to powers that want their own ‘scientific’ facts instated. These facts are drawn from the forgotten past and its mythical ‘achievements’. Prime Minister of India, Mr Modi, claimed in one of his public addresses that plastic surgery must have been performed on the Hindu deity, Ganesha, who has a human body with an elephant’s head. Although Modi’s speech intended to improve healthcare facilities in modern India, he also dwelt on ancient India’s “capabilities” in several fields (The Guardian, 2014).

History is another area where post truth narratives find a fertile ground particularly under the current political dispensation that seeks to rewrite it so as to diminish or even erase any trace in Indian history of the contributions of non-Hindu religious communities, especially Christians and Muslims. If at all they are mentioned, it is all for the wrong reasons, thereby demeaning their very presence in the country. For instance, in school textbooks of Gujarat, we find denigrating mention of Christians and Muslims. In a chapter titled, “Problems of the Country and Their Solutions,” the Social Studies, Std.IX text of the Gujarat Board has a section with a subheading, “Minority Communities” that labels Muslims, even Christians and Parsees, as “foreigners.” (Sabrang, 1999).

CHRISTIAN MESSAGES AMIDST POST-TRUTH NARRATIVES

In an atmosphere that is heavily influenced by post-truth syndrome, sharing the message of Christ becomes all the more challenging. In a multi-religious society, several religious narratives compete with each other to find a respectable space for

acknowledgment. Has Christianity made a mark in India? Since 2000 years ago, when Christianity arrived on the shores of India, the religion has not gained noticeable numerical strength; the Christian population in India remained the same or even declined over the decades after independence. As per the 2011 census, the Christians in India form just 2.31% of the total population of 1.40 billion. Christianity might be seen as a failed project if you go by the numerical growth over the millennia. “The fact is, the story of Christianity in India is a story of dismal failure, demographically speaking. No believing Christian would like to admit this in this manner, but both they and their detractors should open their eyes to the simple fact that stares them in the face: that India has mostly passed up Christianity, and that there is no other country in the world that has proven so resistant and so impervious to it as India,” says Tony Joseph (2011). Corroborating his views with those of Augustine Kanjamala, he says the following: “The traditional concept of the Christian mission is just not relevant any more, definitely not in Asia at least given the ground realities. After nearly three to four centuries of Christian Faith arriving in Asia, less than 3% of the population has accepted it. After so much time, money and effort, as many as 97% of the population has rejected the concept of Christianity (Pawar, 2014).

Although it is apparent that Christianity has not been able to shore up numbers in spite of its best efforts, the mission of the Church cannot and should not be reduced to its mere number of followers. There is something more subtle and yet profound a factor that the Christian presence and its services bring into being; and that must also be acknowledged while making an honest assessment of the mission impact.

THE CATALYST EFFECT

Christians may not have numerically grown in India, but Christians have made positive social impacts on communities that follow other religious traditions. For this reason we could claim a fair share in the progress graph. As Jesudas M Athyal rightly claims, “.....that conversion was not the main purpose of the educational, medical and social work of Christian missions in India..... their sole purpose in India was social outreach.” He also strongly refutes the wide-spread propaganda against Christianity unleashed in order to weaken the morale of the Christian missionaries. Christianity has definitely worked as a means for social transformation in many parts of the world that have been reeling under the weight of social oppression and economic exclusion (Athyal, 2020).

This catalyst effect is conspicuous in an Indian context where many social evils and oppressive practices have been challenged and eradicated through the intervention of Christian missionaries. For instance, the leprosy patients in India were socially ostracised to the extent that they had to live far away from the usual human settlements. It was the Christian missionaries who established Leprosaria for treatment and who rehabilitated them. In fact “the Christian Missionaries were the pioneers in starting hospitals to provide exclusive services to the leprosy patients,” said P.K. Gopal, president of IDEA

(Integration, Dignity and Economic Advancement of people Affected by Leprosy) India, in his presentation at an international symposium in the Vatican in 2016. Similar is Christian advocacy for widows who were consigned to their husband's funeral pyre, as well as for girls children were married off, offered for temple prostitution, and so on. Amongst the earliest female petitioning for the abolition of colonial slavery and other social evils were women associated with the evangelical missionary movement. These movements wanted to abolish 'the evils of Hindostan' as 'family, fireside evils', paying particular attention to the ill-treatment of women, as evidenced by polygamy and sati, and contrasting this with the equality to which women were entitled in all Christian countries (Midgley, 2020).

This transformative process is at work even now in the Christian missionary activities in India. The Christian schools and hospitals and social development interventions leave a lasting impact on an Indian society that it is no longer an isolated civilisation and has increasingly been able to seamlessly integrate well with the rest of the world.

MORE INTEGRAL VISIONS FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

While there is fierce resistance to religious conversion in India, it continues to contribute to social development initiatives by the Christian missionaries. There are several such initiatives by the Christian missionaries in empowering the women, children, oppressed castes and indigenous people. In the recent past, the Church has promoted Small Christian Communities in order to better participate in Christian lives and activities, and this has yielded tangible results. However, the church realises that it cannot remain only at the Christian community level in a country that is populated with people of many religions. The church has long recognized it has to innovate in order to become relevant to larger sections of society, and so recently it began what is known as the Basic Human Communities or Small Human Communities: an initiative that involves people of different religions living in the neighbourhood. The intent of this movement is to "promote neighbourhood communities with people of all religions and castes and thus to promote inter-religious harmony. The ideal size of such a group is 15 to 20 families and these groups meet once every two weeks."

Such Small Human Communities become the forte for integral human development, since planning and execution of any development scheme is always participatory and inclusive. It isn't a top down model. Rather it is envisaged by the beneficiaries and for this reason they get totally involved. With this structure in place, chances of manipulation and corruption are low and hence results of development schemes will begin to show at their best.

NEW CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS ECOSYSTEMS

In the globalised world where people are economic and cultural migrants, there arise new social needs that the Church can respond to. There is a gradual waning of ethnocentrism in the contemporary world as its cities and towns are inhabited

by people of every race and culture. Urban centres are best demolishers of cultural and religious walls; they provide new havens of transcending such narrow identities, thereby providing people new possibilities of forging authentic human relationships. In other words, multiculturalism is the new ecosystem that has emerged in today's world. "Multiculturalism means more than just lots of people from different ethnic backgrounds living together. Instead, it involves each group being encouraged to hold on to—and share—what's valuable about their own distinctive cultures and traditions. It's a commitment to the idea that we're all enriched by diversity; that culture and identity are not a zero-sum game." (Santow, 2017).

International religious congregations like the SVDs focus much on multiculturalism as one of its central tenets of community living and mission enterprise. Although multiculturalism has always been part of the SVD charism, it has been accentuated in contemporary times as a timely response to the signs of the times. The importance placed on internationality by the Society is reflected in our constitutions, where it is mentioned at least twelve times, and it is expressed perhaps most clearly as a defining mark of the Society in the Prologue: "As a community of brothers from different nations and languages, we become a living symbol of the unity and diversity of the church." In our present age, marked as it is by globalization and increased migration, multiculturalism is a characteristic that is more and more appreciated, and needed, by the local churches and the people among whom we live and work (Kisala, 2009: 331).

The church in India in general and the SVD in particular has to reckon with this emerging social reality where multiculturalism and multi-religiosity have become the new normal. And our mission efforts have to be directed to make this new ecosystem stronger and vibrant. This is particularly so important in India and the world around when religious polarising forces are upping their tentacles. As Niranjan Sahoo writes, "Although various actors have launched efforts to counter the country's majoritarian turn and improve civic dialogue, polarization in India is more toxic today than it has been in decades, and it shows no signs of abating" (Niranjan, 2020).

THAT THEY MAY ALL BE ONE (JN 17:21)

Sharing our Christian faith in the contemporary world has become quite a challenging task. But we cannot shy away from it just because it is demanding; as a matter of fact it should goad us to explore new and refreshing ways of transmitting our message of hope and salvation. Despite all polarisation and division among human beings on account of religion, culture, political ideology and others there is one factor that unites all human beings, and that is the indwelling humanity. We must aim at sharing Christ's message with the heart of man which opens itself to the sane messages of unity and peace that our Lord and saviour Lord Jesus earnestly prayed for: Father that they may all be one.

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